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ABSTRACT

While the humanization of organizations has long been a goal of organizational psychologists, it is not as easily achieved as its advocates have wished. In humanized organizations, members are treated justly, are engaged in meaningful work, encouraged to develop their potential, and are treated as ends rather than as means. That these ideals have rarely been achieved is in large part the result of the role that power plays, especially in private economic organizations. The author proposes four postulates that relate to power and its exercise within organizations and that indicate why humanization is a yet-to-be-realized goal. First, organizations are composed of coalitions competing with each other for resources and influence. Second, coalitions, particularly the dominant ones, seek to protect their interests and power by affecting environmental factors. Third, the unequal distribution of power itself has nonhumanizing effects on both the powerful and the unpowerful. And finally, the exercise of power within organizations is one crucial aspect of the exercise of power within the larger social system. (Author/DS)

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Dreams of Humanization and the Realities of Power

by

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For several decades American organizational psychologists have dreamed of and sought to create humanized organizations. While we have been unclear as to exactly what a humanized organization is, various writers have put forth a number of thoughts about how humanized organizations would treat their members. Most writers who have discussed humanized organizations have emphasized some combination of the following thoughts. In humanized organizations members are

1) treated as ends rather than as means
2) engaged in meaningful work which challenges their full capacities
3) encouraged to develop fully their uniquely human abilities
4) treated justly and with a dignity which places them well above the non-human aspects of organization.

and

5) able to exercise substantial control in organizational decisions -- particularly those decisions which affect them directly.

While I want to emphasize that these criteria do not constitute an agreed upon definition, it is reasonable to use these elements individually as criteria of humanization, as I will do in this paper.

As we have dreamed of organizations which would be characterized by at least some of these features, often we have appeared to become convinced that such organizations would be easy to develop. At some points we have been so convinced that humanized organizations were coming that the optimists among us came to see them as inevitable, and the pessimists among us came to see humanized organization as requiring only the enlightenment of managers. These predictions seemed sound, in part because installation

of these humanizing features seemed necessary if organizations were to be effective, to prosper and to survive. A number of things all pointed towards the necessity for more humanized organizations. Bennis (1970) noted, some of these including: (1) the exponential growth of science, (2) turbulent environments, (3) a younger, more mobile, better educated work force, (4) a growth in the confluence between men of knowledge and men of power, (5) a change in managerial philosophy towards the emphasis on a new concept of man based on complex and shifting needs, (6) a new concept of power based on collaboration and reason, and (7) new organizational values based on humanistic-democratic ideals; all pointed towards humanized organizations. However, as Bennis and others have observed, such humanized organizations have not turned out to be inevitable outcomes.

A number of other factors also help to explain why humanization has not taken hold (See Nord; 1974, 1976). However only recently have we begun to explore seriously the role of power as an inhibitor of humanization. In this paper I will attempt to show how a better understanding of power and the political nature of organizations can help us to see why organizations are so resistant to humanization.

To begin, it is necessary to have a working definition of power. Although it is difficult to find a definition of power which everyone will accept, the one I will use is derived from the work of Adams (1975) and Bachrach and Baratz (1970). In this paper power will mean the ability to influence flow of the available energy and resources towards certain goals as opposed to other goals. I will assume that power is exercised only when these goals are at least partially in conflict with each other. The problem of humanizing organizations involves altering the flow of resources and energy so that at least some of the five aspects of humanization I advanced

earlier are given greater emphasis.

The quest for humanized organizations can be broken in two parts. First, we can consider the design of systems in which the achievement of humanized goals and success on traditional criteria of organizational effectiveness are mutually supportive. Secondly, we can consider those cases where the two sets of outcomes are in conflict. It is this second set of cases where considerations of power as I have defined it are most relevant and consequently it is this set of cases which I will take as problematic in this paper. When we come to understand the power processes of organizations, we are likely to have a better understanding of the reasons why organizations have remained so resistent to the efforts of behavioral scientists and others to humanize them. We will be in a better position to understand some of the forces which make such outcomes as power sharing, just and dignified treatment of individuals, and the provision of challenging and growth producing work, unlikely outcomes under existing arrangements.

I will consider four postulates about power and organizations. First, organizations are composed of a number of coalitions of individuals and groups -- each coalition seeking to control or influence the allocation scarce resources. Second, the interests of the dominant and other coalitions will be affected by the pressures which environmental changes exert upon an organization. Consequently, the holders of power, as well as parties seeking power, may attempt to modify the affects of these pressures. Third, the distribution of power itself has important consequences for organizational dynamics. Fourth, the exercise of power within organizations is one very crucial aspect of the exercise of power within the larger social system. In this paper I will try to show how each of these postulates directs attention to some reasons why organizations are, and are likely to remain, difficult

to humanize.

Postulate I: Organizations are composed of coalitions which compete with one another for resources, energy, and influence.

Organizations are a curious mixture of common goals, individual goals, and subgroup goals; conflict is seldom completely resolved. There is always conflict among competing parties for resources and energies. These conflicting parties are often arrayed in a number of coalitions.

As Zaleznik (1970) has argued, competition to become a dominant coalition (or part of one) is intense and an important feature of life in organizations. Moreover, competing coalitions are often engaged in what approaches a zero-sum game. If one coalition exercises dominant control over resources and the allocation process, other coalitions can not. These struggles are reflected in what appear to be the palace revolts which result in the ouster of leading corporate officials. However, as Zaleznik has shown, the struggles are often more subtle and less spectacular. While more information about the magnitude and frequency of these conflicts is needed, it seems reasonable to speculate that the climates created by such struggles are not likely to be conducive to the achievement of humanized ends of justice, dignity, and etc. These ends seem to be much more compatible with non-zero sum conflict.

In addition to focusing on the zero sum features of some organizational conflict, the focus on organizations as coalitions highlights some other constraints upon humanization. In particular we discover why turbulent environments may not have the straight-forward effects of humanizing organizations that are often assumed. Following the strategic contingencies theory of organizational power developed by Hickson et. al. (1971) and Hinnings et. al. (1974) it is clear that changes in the environment affect the balance of

power within the organization. Changes in the environment mean that certain skills and/or resources which were once highly valued may be less so; other skills and resources which were once unimportant are now highly valued. Coalitions which control various types of resources experience changes in their power positions. It seems reasonable to assume that the participants whose power is threatened will respond defensively and/or aggressively. Those who are becoming more powerful will seek to consolidate their position. Consequently, the response of the total organization to such changes is not the rational adaptation of a harmonious system. Rather the response is the resultant vector of conflicting interests, distorted information, and struggle. The more turbulent the environment, the more pervasive and strong the resulting internal strife may be. During and after such conflicts there is little reason to expect that the various parties will treat each other in humanized ways. Moreover, it is reasonable to expect that the scars, particularly when the resources and rights of one or more parties have been reduced, will be very slow to heal once the struggle has been decided. Organizations engaged in such conflict are perhaps better described in the writings of Hobbs and Macheavelli than in the writings of Likert, McGregor, and Argyris.

Postulate 2: Various coalitions, particularly the more dominant ones, will seek to protect their interests and positions of influence by moderating environmental pressures and their effects.

Typically we have assumed that rapidly changing environments result in the deroutinization of work for a large number of organizational participants and hence greater humanization because more individuals will be encouraged to exercise greater discretion and to use a wide variety of their skills and talents. However, Thompson's (1967) analysis gives us reason to ques-

tion this logic. Thompson suggested that while increased discretion may occur, such increases will not be pervasive. Rather, the net result may be an increase in the size of dominant coalition, but little change elsewhere in the organization. Thus, the assumption of a positive correlation between environmental turbulence and discretion in work may be true for only a few employees since, as Thompson implies, members of the dominant coalition are often interested in routinizing the organization's core technology and protecting it from fluctuations in the environment. If the core technology is adequately buffered, the change in the environment may affect very few people.

For example, consider an automobile firm. In many ways, the assembly line process is a highly buffered, protected technology. As materials, consumer preferences, and other things change, much of the uncertainty can be absorbed in the design of the product, the design of work, and the organization's structure. Throughout these changes, there is at best a small chance that operatives on the assembly line will experience significantly more variety in their work or exercise more discretion. Undoubtedly similar arguments could be made about the work of a large number of organizational participants. In short, the interests of the dominant coalition are to reduce the forces which threaten the smooth, routine running of their core technology. Frequently members of this group, operating under the norms of rationality, are motivated to exercise their influence to produce structures which reduce the discretion of lower level participants. Thus, while turbulent environments may force the dominant coalition to dilute its power slightly, there is no assurance that this dilution will humanize the work of all or even most people.

Postulate 3: The unequal distribution of power itself has non-humanizing effects.

The unequal distribution of power itself results in outcomes which are clearly contrary to many of the characteristics of humanized organizations I listed earlier. Let's look at these effects from two perspectives: First, consider the influence of power inequalities on the powerful and second the influence of power inequalities on the less powerful.

The powerful. As I mentioned earlier, Thompson noted that the dominant coalition frequently attempts to design structures which reduce the discretion of lower level participants. In addition to the net effect of reducing discretion, the means employed to limit discretion have important dehumanizing outcomes. For example, consider the goals of justice, dignity, and the ability of individuals to control their own outcomes. The existing power structure can be maintained by making it difficult and costly for individuals to confront the characteristics of their organizations which run counter to dignified and just treatment. For example, O'Day (1974) has described the "intimidation rituals" which members of management use to subtly, and eventually forcibly, prevent a would be reformer from successfully altering the organization.

In a more general, but related argument, political scientists such as Bachrach and Baratz (1970) have suggested that one of the most significant consequences of power is the power of non-decision. They suggested that a major advantage the powerful have is their ability to suppress and/or thwart both latent or manifest challenges to their values and interests, by preventing an issue from being considered to a decision. If the ability to influence one's outcomes is a criterion of humanization, existing power structures often subvert the achievement of this end. Fre-

quently movement towards humanized organizations will require that issues which have been handled by non-decision in the past, are negotiated in the present. As the history of trade unionism documents such a process is often bitter, and the humanized outcomes are by no means inevitable.

Moreover, there is ample evidence that possession of power itself can lead to non-humanized treatment of lower level participants by the powerful. There are a number of studies in the literature which are most instructive on this point. Several of them have been reported by Kipnis (1972) and Kipnis, Castell, Gergen, & Mauch (1976). Based on his work Kipnis (1972) concluded

> ... the control of power triggers a chain of events, which, in theory, at least, goes like this: (a) with the control of power goes increased temptations [sic] to influence others' behavior. (b) as actual influence attempts increase, there arises the belief that the behavior of others is not self-controlled, that it is caused by the powerholder, (c) hence, a devaluation of their performance. In addition, with increased influence attempts, forces are generated within the more powerful to (d) increase psychological distance from the less powerful and view them as objects of manipulation. (p. 40)

Studies which lead to similar conclusions have been conducted by Zimbardo and Rosenhan. Zimbardo's (New York Times, 1973) discussion of his mock prison at Stanford University and Rosenhan's (1973) observations of treatment of mental patients by hospital personnel provide relatively convincing evidence that the position of power itself leads the powerful to treat the less powerful in a non-humanized fashion.

Overall, it appears that the possession of the power has important behavioral effects. In McGregor's terms, there seems to be a tendency for powerful people to adopt Theory X assumptions about their subordinates.

Effects on the less powerful. The unequal distribution of power has

complementary, non-humanizing effects on the less powerful. While I knew of few organizational studies of this phenomenon, evidence of it can be found in a variety of sources. For example, Michael Harrington's (1962) description of "twisted spirit" of the American poor and the "culture of poverty" provides a clear demonstration of the effects of powerlessness. Similarly, Gouldner (1970) has noted that feelings of dependence result in individuals developing servile attitudes towards their superiors. Moreover, Nemeth (1970) reported that inequities in the distribution of power tend to inhibit cooperative behavior. In addition, Lefcourt (1973) has comprehensively reviewed the psychological effects of the feelings of powerlessness which accrue to individuals. Finally, Culbert (1974) has discussed how the relatively powerless become trapped by shared assumptions which make them vulnerable to excess influence. Such assumptions induce individuals to accept the status quo rather than to develop alternative ways of thinking and acting. Thus it seems reasonable to hypothesize that, at least under many conditions, humanized relationships may be more probable when individuals are relatively equal in their power relationships with each other than when they are grossly discrepant.

Postulate 4: The exercise of power within organizations is one very crucial aspect of the exercise of power within the larger social system.

One of the most productive outcomes of assessing the relationship between power and humanized organizations may well be that such discussions direct us to the work of political scientists. Their ideas point to some important omissions in our thinking about power and control of work organizations. Robert Dahl's (1970) book provides a basis for exploring some of

these considerations.

Suppose we assume, as we have done in our political ideology, that democracy or equality in the ability to exert control is a potent force for more humanized decisions. While Dahl was explicit about a number of factors which qualify this democratic assumption, he did suggest that organizational democracy may be a necessary condition for a humanized social system. Dahl directed his attention primarily at macro issues; he was concerned with organizational democracy as a way of changing the current situations where what are in fact public decisions are made by private officials. (For example, given the magnitude of the resources and consequences involved, Dahl suggests that many decisions made by firms like General Motors can not reasonably be considered private matters).

Dahl has observed that in America, we have made a strange ideological distinction about the exercise of power. Power exercised in political organizations ought to be public and democratic; power <u>within</u> economic organizations, however, need not be democratic and in fact ought to be left in the hands of the owners or managers of the firm. In Dahl's words

> ...the prevailing ideology prescribes "private" enterprise, that is, firms managed by officials who are legally, if not de facto responsible to private shareholders ... . It is widely taken for granted that the only appropriate form for managing economic enterprise is a privately owned firm... . Ordinarily technical arguments in favor of an alternative must be of enormous weight to overcome the purely ideological bias in favor of the private firm. (p. 117-118).

According to Dahl this ideological bias and the correlated absence of a socialist tradition has left us without the "...capacity for clear headed public consideration of how economic enterprises should be governed." (p. 119).

Pateman (1975) built upon Dahl's work to provide some insights about

processes within organizations. Pateman suggested that since organizations are so important in the lives of people, a fully democratic society is possible only if democratic voting is extended to organizations. She maintained that unless such an extension is made, voting and representation are doomed to be largely formal matters. Pateman wrote:

> The aim of organizational democracy is democracy. It is not primarily increased productivity, efficiency, or better industrial relations (even though these things may even result from organizational democracy); rather it is to further justice, equality, freedom, the rights of citizens, and the protection of interests of citizens, all familiar democratic aims. (p. 18-19).
>
> It is within such a self-managing organizational democracy that contemporary theories of "participative management" and the many current experiments with job enlargement, job enrichment, project management, and the rest can take their place. Such measures are often treated with suspicion by radicals and unions, and they do often, but not always, amount to little more than pseudo-participation...; on the other hand, seen in the right way, they provide a basis for 'encroaching control' in present non-democratic organizations and they also provide valuable experience and information for the democratized organization itself. (p. 20-21)
>
> It is only a radical, participatory approach to organizational democracy that is likely to foster the expertise, skills, and confidence, both in the daily work process and in the exercise of democratic citizenship with the enterprise, that are vital if members of the organization as a whole are to be equipped to meet the challenge of control that will come from the technostructure (p. 21).

This argument leads to a direct consideration of the right to exercise power within an organization in a democratic society. Inquiry into this question, of course, has potentially radical implications. When we start to discuss power in this way, we are beginning to ask as Ellerman (1975) did, "Who is the firm?" When we start discussing power our perspective may broaden. We begin to question the rights by which certain individuals or

groups now exercise control. It may well be that alternative bases of power are much more consistent with the existence of not only a fully democratic system but with humanization of organizations itself. When we focus on power we are focusing on the right to make decisions or to not make decisions as well as on the nature of the particular decisions made.

Based on our ideology and the work of a number of political scientists. It seems reasonable to assume that equal access to power (political democracy) is a force for justice, human dignity and control over one's outcomes in organizations as well as in society. If these outcomes include much of what we mean by humanization, (and I believe they do), then we may be forced to at least consider organizational democracy as a necessary condition for humanization.

Conclusion

When we look at the criteria commonly used to define humanization and we view organizations as power systems, humanization of organizations is anything but inevitable. Perhaps, without distorting my position too much, I can summarize the feelings which underlie my argument by looking at the two Golden Rules. First it seems to me that many of us who seek to humanize organizations dream of organizations where the powerful people either out of self interest or out of moral commitment, follow the first golden rule -- "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This rule, however, is not very descriptive of much of the world we live in. The real world is perhaps better characterized by the second Golden Rule, the source of which I found on the wall in a men's room at Washington University. This golden rule states, "Them that has the gold makes the rules."

Existing rules in organizations and the distribution of organizational resources do not support humanized relationships. Humanization of such systems is by no means inevitable, but instead, may require considerable struggle. Perhaps the basis for such a struggle can be solidified by treating organizations more as political systems than as goal seeking entities and understanding the role that power plays in these systems better than we now do. In this regard, the political scientists may be able to help us, although in turning to them we run the risk of broadening our scope beyond what is normally considered that of organizational psychology.

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